DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 209 729 EA 014 181

AUTHOR Mehan, Hugh
TITLE The Role of Language and the Language of Role in Practical Decision Making.
PUB DATE Aug 81
NOTE 40p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (Toronto, Ontario, Canada, August 24-28, 1981). Not available in paper copy due to marginal legibility of original document. Figure 1 may be illegible.

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; *Decision Making; Disabilities; Elementary Education; Lay People; Power Structure; *Professional Recognition; Role Theory; Special Education; *Speech Communication; *Status; *Student Placement
IDENTIFIERS *Professional Role; Role; *Technical Language

ABSTRACT

In observing 51 decisions made in a school district over the period of a year concerning the placement of elementary students in special education, the author noted that most decisions seemed to be presented and accepted rather than debated. To discover why, he analyzes one meeting and placement decision of the district's eligibility and placement committee. After describing the district's student referral process and the paths followed by special education students, the author lists the four phases of the committee's proceedings, including information presentation, decision-making, parents' rights explanation, and student goal-setting. Analysis of the language used by the meeting's participants in the information-presentation phase shows that the professional participants presented (without interruption) test-based academic information, using mystifying technical language. However, the nonprofessionals' observational, emotion-based information was elicited by questions, was frequently interrupted, and was communicated in everyday language. Further, the nonprofessionals depicted the student in situational, historical, and biographical contexts while the professionals did not. The author concludes that the roles of professional and layperson are embedded in the language used in the meeting, and that the different authority assigned to these roles explains the acceptance without debate of the professionals' recommendations. (Author/RW)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED209729

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

H. Mehan

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

# The Role of Language and the Language of Role in Practical Decision Making

Hugh Mehan

Department of Sociology

University of California, San Diego

Paper prepared for presentation

at the 1981 American Sociological Association Meetings

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

August 24, - 28, 1981

EA 014 181

1. Rough Draft. Do not quote or reference without written permission

A routine problem confronting educators in school settings is the assessment of students' performance and the determination of appropriate learning environments for their education. Teachers make such determinations within classrooms when they make moment-to-moment decisions about students' performance during question-answer sequences, and across lessons, or when they place students into ability groups. Educators also make such determinations when they decide to promote students to the next higher grade, retain, or promote them.

This latter kind of routine and recurrent practical activity is the focus of this paper. More specifically, the decision making of committees of educators as they decide whether to place students into special education programs or retain them in their regular classrooms, provides the context for this study of practical reasoning.

A striking feature of the educators' decision making activities is that they do not seem to be making decisions, or at least, they are not making them in the way that conventional theories of decision making have depicted them. They seem to present decisions rather than debate them. This paper is addressed to the following question: What organizational arrangements provide for this presentational manner of making decisions? An understanding of the educators' decision making activity is located in the role that language plays in practical reasoning.

Public Law, Students' Careers, and The Special Educational Referral System

Under normal circumstances, students progress through school in a regular sequence. They enter school in the kindergarten, and at the end of each year, are promoted to the next higher grade. Not all students follow this routine career pattern through school, however. Under unusual circumstances, students are removed from their regular classroom during the school year, and are placed in a variety of "special education" programs.

These special career paths have been a long standing feature of public schools in the U.S. Recently, federal legislation has formalized the procedures involved in placing students in special education programs. Public Law 94-142, "The Education for All Handicapped Students" Act, was enacted to integrate handicapped individuals into the mainstream of American life. This act mandates a free and appropriate public education for all handicapped children between the ages of 3 and 21, and sets up a system of federal financial support to states who implement the law. Funds are supplied to each school system for each student who is enrolled until the number of students reaches 12% of the school population, after which no additional funds are available.

In order to describe the decision making process involved as students are referred from "regular" elementary school classrooms and are considered for placement in one of a number of "special" educational programs, or are retained in the regular classroom, we followed the progress of students' cases through the special education referral system mandated by PL 94-142. A given case has the potential of progressing through a number of major decision making points, including "referral," "appraisal," "assessment," "re-appraisal," "evaluation," and "placement." These decision making points are identified by

a ◇? in Figure 1.

--insert Figure 1 here--

Decisions to place students into special education programs were made by the "Eligibility and Placement" (E&P) committee, a team at the district level composed of the referred student's parent(s), the school administrator in charge of special education, the school nurse, the district psychologist, the referring teacher, and a special education teacher. This committee had a number of placement options: it could recommend that the student be retained in the regular classroom, be placed in a number of special education programs, receive counseling, or be placed in a program outside the school district at district expense. Special education programs within the district can be grouped into "whole day" or "self contained" programs and "pullout" programs. Self contained programs (see #9, 11, and 12 in Figure 1) are considered more severe placements, because the student is removed from the regular classroom on a permanent basis. In pullout programs, such as the "learning disabilities program," the student spends part of the school day in the regular classroom, and part of the day in a special classroom.

A total of 141 first time referrals were processed through the school system during the 1978-79 school year in which we gathered material for this study. The average enrollment of the district was 2781. This means that 5% of the students in this district were referred during the school year in which the study was conducted.

The various "career paths" through the referral system are depicted in Figure 1. Table 1 summarizes the number of students, or rather, students'

cases that traversed these paths.

--insert Table 1 here--

The most well travelled career path through the referral system is from the classroom through referral, appraisal, assessment, and placement into a learning disabilities program. A total of 36 students (25.5% of the referred students) were placed in this "pullout" program (where students spend part of their day in their home classrooms, and part of their day in a special education classroom). The next most represented educational decision is career path #5, "no evaluation recommended." A student achieves this educational designation when his or her referral is considered by the School Appraisal Team, educational assessment is recommended and conducted, but upon reappraisal of the case, the SAT concludes further consideration is not warranted. Instead, the student is retained in the regular classroom. A total of 28 cases (20%) travelled this career path through the referral system. A formal decision was not reached on a significant number of cases because the referral process was interrupted for a variety of reasons. A total of 29 cases (see career paths #3, #6, and #8 in Table 1) or 20% fell into this category. The consequence of all these disruptions is that the student is left in the regular classroom, but not by decision, rather by default. The great majority (63%) of special education cases were placed into the less severe, "pullout," programs by the E&P Committee, while 27% of the special education cases were placed into more severe, "self contained" programs by this committee.

This is some information about the products of the referral system, the educational "facts" of the referral process, if you will. (For more information, see Mehan, Meihls, Hertweck, and Crowdes, 1981). We are interested in

describing the institutional practices that constitute these educational facts. To this end, we have been conducting more micro, "constitutive," analyses of a number of key events at the referral, assessment, and placement phases of the referral system. Since the referral process starts in the classroom, we have been attempting to uncover the grounds of teachers' referrals, and depict the relations between teachers' accounts and students' behavior (Mehan, Hertweck, Combs, and Flynn, 1981; Hertweck and Mehan, 1981). When the referral process involves psychological assessment, we have been examining the procedures that assemble test results, and inform a diagnosis which is then used at later stages in the referral system (Meihls, 1981). This paper and a companion piece (Mehan, 1981) extend the analysis to the Eligibility and Placement (E&P) Committee, which is the final stage in the decision making process. The companion piece examines activities that occur before and surrounding the E&P meeting; this paper is concerned with activities within the E&P Committee as it made final placement decisions about special education students. Together, these papers provide a more complete picture of the social processes of decision making.

## Practical Decision Making in Committee Meetings

The principle purpose of E&P Committee meetings is to determine the most appropriate educational placement for the student referred to the committee. The range of possible placements are shown on Figure 1. Fifty-one (51) cases were considered by the E&P committee during the year of our study; in all but one case, the decision reached involved the placement of the student in one of the special education programs within the district.

The committee meetings that we observed in the district during the year of our study had the following "segments"[1] which took place in the following temporal sequence:

1. Information Presentation Phase:
information about the student was presented by the committee members;

2. Decision Phase:
the committee would reach a decision about the appropriate placement for the child;

3. Parents' Rights Phase:
parents' rights to educational services and the range of evaluative services were explained;

4. Goals and Objectives Phase:
the goals and objectives were be written based on the discrepancy between the child's actual and expected level of performance.

There are a number of striking features about the interaction among the committee members concerning the placement of students. Placement decisions were made quickly. After the school psychologist, classroom teacher, nurse, and parents provided information about the student (Phase #1), the student's placement was determined. The following transcripts are representative of the interaction in the second, or "Decision" phase of the meeting:

EDM# 33

92 Psy. does the uh, committee agree that the, uh learning disability placement is one that might benefit him?

93 Prin. I think we agree.

94 Psy. We're not considering then a special day class at all for him?

95 S.F.T. I wouldn't at this point//

---

1. see McDermott et al (1978), Mehan (1978, 1979) and Erickson and Shultz (1977, 1980) for more information about the segmentation of naturally occurring events into their constituents.

96 Many No.

EDM# 47

28 Psy. Okay, in light of all the data that we have, I think that the program we want to recommend is the learning disability group pullout program.

29 Mother Pullout=I don't understand that//

30 Psy. For Tracy. You know, that's the program we sort of talked about that day, where he would be pulled out of the classroom for specific work on the areas that he needs, that, you know, are identified today.

EDM# 57

35 Psy. Okay. Now, okay, now than, let's, why don't we take a vote. Um, for the Learning Disabilities Group pull-out program. Um, is there anyone, anyone who does not agree? (3) Okay. I think that was unanimous. (soft laughter) All right. Then what we have to do now is sign. But, um, before we sign I'd like to have uh, Suzanna um, talk about the rights to private schooling and talk about your rights as parents.

Psy=Psychologist; S.E.T.=Special Education Teacher; Prin.=Principal

These exchanges do not have the features routinely associated with "decision making," in either rational model or systems theory terms (Abrahansson, 1977). Certainly this mode of reasoning varies considerably from descriptions of "rational" decision making, in both its "comprehensive" (Parsons, 1932; Weber, 1947: 115-118, 1949: 52-53; Schelling, 1950) and "bounded" (Simon, 1949; Watkins, 1970) forms, where rational decision making has been described as the presentation of a range of alternatives, the consideration of the consequences of any choice singly, and in combination with all others.

The entire range of possible placements was not discussed during these placement meetings. At most, the possibility of placement in one or two closely related programs was discussed, e.g., an EH or an LDG program. And

these possibilities were not debated or discussed. They were presented to the committee by the school psychologist without question or challenge by other members of the committee, including the parents.

We seek to understand this manner of reaching educational decisions. We do not wish to disparage this mode of decision making, but to understand it. Hence, we will not make invidious comparisons to either the rational or the systems models of decision making mentioned above; instead we will describe the mode of reasoning in placement meetings in its own terms. That is, the inquiry is "recollective." It aims to re-collect what is known by the participants in this practical activity, albiet tacitly known by them (Mehan, 1979:173-176;Heap, 1980).

In order to reveal the machinery that provides for this mode of reaching decisions, it is necessary to go beyond the texts of the decisions of reasoning, themselves, into the events that led up to them. One transcript of a committee meeting in which a student, Shane, was placed in a LDG classroom will be used to illustrate this point. In the course of the analysis which follows, references to the interaction among the committee members will be made. The complete transcript of the meeting and the transcript conventions used in it are appended to the paper.

## Lay and Professional Reports

There are a number of striking patterns in the language of the four reports made to the committee during the initial "presentation" phase of the meeting. One set of these patterns involves relations among speaker and format, source of information and mode of presentation, mode of presentation and

speaker, and speaker and topic. Another set of patterns involve the manner in which contextual features are referenced by committee members. The compilation of these form-function and contextual relationships leads to a distinction between "lay" and "professional" reports. This distinction indexes an important part of the role that language plays in authority relations within the institutionalized order of the school, which, in turn, reveals the grounds upon which decisions are made.

## The Role of Language and the Language of Role

The discussion of form-function relationships begins with a consideration of speaker-format relations. [2]

Speaker-Format Relations. The information that the committee obtained from the classroom teacher and the mother appeared in a different form than the information made available by the school psychologist and the nurse. The information that the nurse and the psychologist had about the student was presented to the committee in a single uninterrupted report.

The meeting was started by the school psychologist. She introduced the purpose of the meeting as follows:

1 Psy Um. What we're goin, to do is, I'm going to have a brief, an overview o. the testing because the rest of, of the, the committee has not, uh, has not an, uh, been aware of that yet. And uh, then each of us will share whatever, whatever we feel we need to share.

2 Prin Right.

---

2. See Hymes (1974) and Ervin-Tripp (1973) for the original seminal statements about the importance of form-function relationships for an understanding of language in society.

3 Psy And then we will make a decision on what we feel is a good, oh (3) placement (2) for an, Shane.

The school psychologist immediately provided the committee members with the information she had about the student:

3 Psy Shane is ah nine years old, and he's in fourth grade. Uh, he, uh, was referred because of low academic performance and he has difficulty applying himself to his daily class work. Um, Shane attended the Montisorri School in kindergarten and first grade, and then he entered Carlsberg-bad in, um, September of 1976 and, uh, entered our district in, uh, '78. He seems to have very good peer relationships but, uh, the teachers, uh, continually say that he has difficulty with handwriting. 'kay. He enjoys music and sports. I gave him a complete battery and, um, I found that, uh, he had a verbal I.Q. of 115, performance of 111, and a full scale of 115, so he's a bright child. Uh, he had very high scores in, uh, information which is his long-term memory. Ah, vobaculary, was, ah, also, ah, considerably over average, good detail awareness and his, um, picture arrangement scores, he had a seventeen which is veryahigh

4 S.E.T. Hmmm

5 Psy avery superior rating, so he, his visual sequencing seems to be good and also he has a good grasp of anticipation and awareness of social situations. Um, he (5) (she is scanning her notes) scored in reading at 4.1, spelling 3.5, and arithmetic 3.0, which gave him a standard score of 100 in, uh, reading, 95 in spelling, and 90 in arithmetic. When compared with his <u>overall</u> score, it does put him somewhat ah below his, you know, his capabilities. I gave him the Bender Gestalt (clears throat) and he had six errors. And his test age was 7-0 to 7-5 and his actual age is nine, so it, uh, he was considerably beneath his, uh, hisuh, age level. (2) His, I gave him the, uh VADS and his, um (5 or 6) (looking through notes) both the oral-aural and the visual-written modes of communication were high but the visual oral and the oral written are low::, so he, uh, cannot switch channels. His expressive vocabulary was in the superior range (6). Uh, visual perception falls above age level, so he's fine in that area (6). And fine motor skills appear to be slightly lower than, uh, average, (voice trails off slightly), I saw them.

(3) He read words very quickly when he was doing the academics but I didn't see any reversals in his written work. Uh, I gave him several projective tests and, um, the things that I picked up there is that, um he <u>does</u> possibly have some fears and anxieties, uh, (5). So I had felt ah, that perhaps he might, uh, uh, benefit, um, (3) from special help. He also was tested, um, in 1976 and at that time he was given the WISC-R and his I.Q. was slightly lower, full scale of a 93 (3 or 4). His, um, summary of that evaluation, uh, was, uh, he was given the ITPA and he had high auditory reception, auditory association, auditory memory. (2) So his auditory skills are good. (3) He was given another psychol- psychological evaluation in 1977. He was given the Leiter and he had an I.Q. of 96 (6). And, um (3 or 4) they concluded that he had a poor mediate recall (2) but they felt that was due to an emotional overlay and they felt that some emotional conflicts were, uh, interferring with his ability to concentrate.

At the end of this presentation, the psychologist asked the student's teacher to provide information:

5 Psy Kate, would you like to share with u:s?

6 CLT What, the problems I see ( ) Um...

7 Psy Yes.

8 CLT Um. Probably basically the fine motor types of things are difficult for him. He's got a very creative mi:ind and expresses himself well ( ) orally and verbally and he's pretty alert to what's going on. (2) Maybe a little bit <u>too</u> much, watching EVERYthing that's (hh) going (hh) on, and finds it hard to stick to one task. And <u>mostly</u> I've been noticing that it's just his writing and things that he has a, a block with. And he can rea:ad and comprehend some things when I talk to him, <u>but</u> doing independent type work is hard for him.

9 Prin. mhmmm, putting it down on paper...

10 CLT Yeah::, and sticking to a task//

11 Princ. mmhmmm

12 CLT =and getting it done, without being// distracted by (hehhehheh)...

13 SET. How does he relate with what the other kids do?

14 CLT Uh, very well (slight stress). He's got a lot of frie:ends, and, uh, especially, even out on the playground he's, um (3), wants to get in on the games, get on things and is well accepted. So::, I don't see too many problems there.

CLT=Classroom Teacher

In this sequence, we have the classroom teacher beginning to present some of the characteristics of the student (8), and being interrupted by the principal (9), before the special education teacher took the floor (13). From that point on, the special education teacher asked the classroom teacher a series of questions about the child's peer relations (13), reading level (15), performance in spelling (21), and math (27). The school nurse also participated in the questioning of the teacher. She asked the teacher how "she handled the reading problem" (29). After the school psychologist moved the discussion away from these academic concerns to a more personal one: how the student handles failure (40), the questioning shifted to the mother. The special education teacher asked the mother about his fine motor control at home:

46 SET How do you find him at <u>home</u> in terms of using his fingers and fine motor kinds of things? Does he do//

47 Mother =He will, as a small child, he didn't at all. He was never interested in it, he wasn't interested in sitting in my lap and having a book read to him, any things like that//

48 SET mhmmm

49 Mother =which I think is part of it you know. His, his older brother was just the opposite, and learned to write real early. <u>Now</u> Shane, at night, lots of times he comes home and he'll write or draw. He's really doing a lot

50 SET ( )

51 Mother =he sits down and is writing love notes to his girl friend (hehheh). He went in our bedroom last

night and turned on the TV and got out some colored pencils and started writing. So he, really likes to, and of course he brings it all into us to see//

52 SET =mhmmm

53 Mother and comment on, so I think, you know, he's not NEGAtive about//

54 SET =no

55 Mother =that anymore

56 SET =uh huh

57 Mother He was before, but I think his attitude's changed a lot.

These transcript inserts are representative of the manner in which information about the student was made available to the members of the committee by the psychologist, the teacher and the mother. A complete listing of the relationship between the source of information and the way in which it was made available to the committee is shown in Table 2, which lists the topics of discussion, the person presenting the information, and its mode of presentation.

--insert Table 2 here--

This table shows that the information that the nurse and the psychologist had about the student was presented to the committee in a single, uninterrupted report, while the mother's information was elicited from them by other members of the committee. In fact, the classroom teacher's presentation and the mother's presentation took the form of an interrogation. Information from the mother and the teacher became available to the committee in the form of answers to questions posed by the committee members.

The format of the classroom teacher's report and the mother's report is different from the psychologist's and the nurse's in another respect. The

psychologist provided a summary of the results of a given test or subtest in a standard format. She named the subtest, reported the student's score, and gave her interpretations of the results. For example:

3.9 I gave him a complete battery, and I found that, uh, he had a verbal I.Q. of 115, performance of 111, and a full scale of 115, so he's a bright child

3.11 He had very high scores in, uh, information, which is his long term memory.

3.14 His, um, picture arrangement scores, he had a seventeen, which is very high, very superior rating.

Thus, the educational test results provided the grounds of the psychologist's assertions about the student. [3]

Perhaps because the mother and the teacher were being interrogated, their information was not presented to the committee in a standard format. For example, the teacher provided general statements "he's got a very creative mind and expresses himself well" (8), as well as some more specific assertions: "he can read and comprehend some things when I talk to him, but doing independent type work is hard for him" (8). The format of the mother's presentation is different from both of these. Her turns at talk were lengthy answers to immediately preceeding questions and were embedded in commentary on previous discussions.

Source-mode relations. The sources of information for the classroom teacher's report and the mother's report are also different from that of the psychologist and the nurse. Whereas the nurse and psychologist reported information about the student based on educational tests, the classroom

3. Turn #5 contains many other tokens of this presentational format. Alternative forms are to be found in turn #3.

teacher and mother based their reports on first hand observations. While the classroom teacher's observations were confined to a relatively short temporal unit (a school year) and a circumscribed spatial and social arrangement (the classroom), the mother's observations concern the child's actions in a wide variety of situations, and span a lifetime. Thus, the information gathered by systematic albeit indirect observations (i.e., that gathered from specialized tests) was presented to the committee, while information that was heard on direct albeit unguided or unstructured observation (which included information about classroom experiences and home life) was elicited from participants.

Mode-speaker relationships. The mode in which information was presented to the committee varied according to the status and official expertise of the participants in the meeting. In terms of the official table of organization in the district, the psychologist and the nurse are ranked higher than the classroom teacher (and the mother is not an official part of the educational system). The nurse and the psychologist work for the district office; the teacher works for one particular school. Technical expertise is coupled with this status ranking. The nurse and psychologist have advanced degrees, and represent technical specialities.

Furthermore, the school psychologist has an institutionally designated role responsibility. Part of the role of school psychologist involves accumulating all the information available about the child being considered by the committee. To do so, the psychologist had discussed the child with the teacher and his mother, and observed him in the classroom. As "case carrier," then, she had more knowledge about the child than any single individual attending the meeting. While the mother knows the child at home, and the

teacher knows him in the classroom, only the psychologist has this information compiled in a single place.

Not only does the psychologist have "more" information, calibrated in terms of quantity or amount, the school psychologist has "official" i. e., qualitatively different, information about the child. She has administered official and professional tests to the child. This official information is coupled with the information gathered from many other sources to compose the "case."

This combination of technical expertise and organizational rank is manifest in the stratification of talking arrangements present in the meeting. The most highly technical information (that from tests) was made available by the most highly trained people in attendance at the meeting, while the personal observations were made available by the participants with the least technical expertise. Speakers of officially higher rank and who spoke with their authority grounded in technical expertise, presented their information, while speakers of lower rank, who spoke with authority based on first hand observations, had information elicited from them.

Topic-Speaker Relationships. There is another interesting form-function relationship in evidence in this phase of the meeting, a correlation between topic of discussion and speaker (see Table 2). Academic information (including educational test results, academic performance in class) is the domain of educators. It is discussed by teacher, nurse, and psychologist. Emotions and feelings (including attitudes toward school and a new educational program), are the province of mothers and teachers. In fact, with one exception, the mother is only called on to comment on the emotional aspects of the case

before the committee. The one exception was the topic of the student's small motor control activities at home. And, this issue was raised after the committee had established the fact that this was the source of the student's difficulty, so the mother's contribution was not a crucial piece of information.

Summary. These constellations of form-function relationships provide the first strands of evidence to distinguish between lay and professional reports. A further distinction between them is found in the way that context, in both its situational and biographical sense, operates in the presentations to the committee.

Contingent and Non-Contingent Reports.

Perhaps as a consequence of the differences in the grounds of the reports made by the mother, the teacher, the psychologist, and the nurse, the issue before the committee is discussed differently by its members.

Categorical assessments of student performance. The main topic of discussion was the student and his characteristics. The student is characterized by the psychologist as having "troubles" and "problems." For example, the school psychologist says:

"he has difficulty applying himself to his daily work" (3)

"he cannot switch channels" (5)

"he has some fears and anxieties" (5)

At some points in the meeting, the classroom teacher characterizes the problem in a similar way:

"the problems I see" (6)

"...the fine motor types of things are difficult for him" (8)

"doing independent work is hard for him" (8)

Thus, the issue before the committee is the child and his problem. The child's problems were characterized by both the classroom teacher and the psychologist as being private and internal to the student. They are treated as if they are his private and personal possession. This is a prime example of the use of dispositional properties in the search for the explanation of other people's behaviors (D'Andrade, 1974; Shweder, 1977; Cantor and Mischel, 1979). This "personological" or individualized defect (Lopes, 1979) metaphor places the source of the problem "squarely on the back, or rather on the head of the child" (Coles, 1978:333).[4] The purpose of the meeting, indeed the entire referral enterprise is to solve the student's problem, and to do so by altering or modifying the internal states of the student.

Situational contingencies of student performance. While the student's problem is the focus of attention for the entire committee, the lay people in attendance at the meeting introduce information about the student which is different than that offered by the professionals. Notable in this regard are comments about the student's motivation: the teacher says "he enjoys math" (28) in response to the special education teacher's request for information about his math performance. She comments: "he enjoys handwriting and wants to learn it" (30), "he seems to enjoy handwriting and wants to learn it" (30), "he really tries at it hard and seems to wanna learn it better" (34).

She also discusses some of the circumstances surrounding the student's "problems." She introduced a number of contingencies that influenced the

---

4. See Lakoff and Johnson (1980) for an explication of the structure and power of "metaphors we live by."

student's performance:

1. his performance varies as a function of preparation: "If he studies his spelling and concentrates on it he can do pretty well" (22).

2. his performance varies according to the kinds of materials and tasks: (a) "It's hard for him to copy down [math] problems...if he's given a sheet where he can fill in answers and work them out he does much better" (28), (b) he does better on group tasks, "but doing independent type work is hard for him" (8), (c) if the tasks at hand are a means to some other end desired by the student, then his performance improves: "if there's something else he wants to do and knows he needs to do and knows he needs to get through that before he can get on to something else, he'll work a little more dilligently at it" (45).

3. The teacher's remediations are contingent upon the kind of work and the importance of the task. When the nurse asked her how she dealt with the "writing problems," the teacher indicated that her response varied. She either had him redo work if the task was important (30), or if it was a "rush job," then she would only have him clean it up a bit (30).

The classroom teacher provides more details about the circumstances surrounding the problems. When the classroom teacher was asked by the special education teacher about the student's reading level (15), the teacher responded: "about middle third grade" (16), an answer presumably based on the results of a reading test or the reading series used with the student. She then embellished this response with some details about his performance; "He's a good reader, but as far as comprehending it and being able to recall

sequences of a story and things like that" (16). She identified two components of the reading task, and provides some sense of the particulars of the reading process upon which her assessment is based.

When the special education teacher asked her about the student's work in spelling (21), she did not only comment on his level of performance; she also provided information about the aspects of the spelling process that cause him difficulty--namely final consonants and silent letters (22).

When the special education teacher asked the teacher about the student's handwriting (31-34), even though presented with a "choice question," she did not respond with either a yes or a no answer. She exceeded the minimal demands of this question by indicating frequency of use, by comparing this student to other students that she knows who "slip back into printing." And, once again, she mentioned his motivation--"he tries to learn" and performs academic tasks.

The classroom teacher also made observations about the manner in which the student performs his work, that is the process, and not just the outcome or product of his work:

> "he's got his multiplication tables down pretty well, but not as quick as I'd like to see him have them" (28)

Here, the speed of processing is discussed along with the student's knowledge of the academic task.

> "...doing independent type work is hard for him...sticking to a task...and getting it done without being distracted" (8-12)

Here, his perserverance and concentration are discussed along with the kind of academic task he has been assigned.

The psychologist had introduced the topic of "peer relations" in her report: "he seems to have good peer relationships" (3). The special education teacher returned to this topic in her questioning of the teacher.

The teacher provided some more detail about his relations with classmates in her answer (14). She provided more particulars later in the meeting, explaining that he's been elected a class officer, and gets along well with girls (87 and 89).

In sum, the teacher, like the psychologist, characterized the issue at hand as "the student's problem." However, the teacher's characterization, unlike that of the psychologist, had a contingent quality. The psychologist made absolute and categorical statements about the student's abilities. She placed the locus of the student's problem within him. The result is a view of a child who has a general, i.e., "context free" disability. In responding to the questions asked by other members of the committee, the classroom teacher tempered her report with contingent factors of a situational sort. She said that the student's performance was influenced by his state of motivation, kinds of classroom tasks, and types of materials. The result is a "context bound" view of a child, one who has specific problems in certain academic situations, but who operates more than adequately in other situations.

Historical and biographical contingencies of student performance. If it can be said that the classroom teacher is expanding the range of information available to the committee spatially, by providing situational or local contextual information, then the mother's report adds a temporal dimension by providing historical and biographical contextual information. She continually contrasts her son as he was at an earlier age with how he is now. In each of

these contrasts, she emphasizes improvements and changes for the better. Thus it seems she is working to redeem her child. While she seems to acknowledge the official committee position that there is a problem, she attempts to legitimate her child by emphasizing improvements and by providing an alternative explanation of the source of the problem. For her, the locus of difficulty is not within him, ("it's not physical," "it's not functional"), but it is to be found in his past experience, and the situations he has been in.

Summary. Thus, the reports provided by the psychologist, classroom teacher, mother and nurse can be placed on a continuum from the contingent to the non-contingent. The mother's report is at the contingent end of the continuum because she provides particulars about the biography and history of her son, and references situational circumstances. The classroom teacher's report sits next to the mother's because she tempers her report with statements about local circumstances, but does not provide historical particulars. The nurse's and the psychologist's report are at the non-contingent end of the continuum, because these statements are presented stripped of all contextual features of the situational, and historical variety.

## The Distinction Between Lay and Professional Reports

In sum, the mother's and the teacher's reports have the following features in common:

1. Their mode of presentaton was elicitation;

2. They were made available by people who occupy low status positions (both in terms of institutional stratification and distribution of technical knowledge);

3. Their claims to truth were based on common sense knowledge;

4. Their reports were based on direct albeit unguided or unstructured observations.

5. They offered contingent assessments of student performance;

6. They resulted in a context-bound view of student disability.

By contrast, the psychologist's and the nurse's reports had the following features in common:

1. They were presented, not elicited;

2. They were presented by people who occupy high status positions;

3. Their claims were based on technical knowledge and expertise;

4. They were based on indirect albeit guided or structured observations.

5. They offered categorical assessments of student performance;

6. They resulted in a context-free view of student disability.

I will call the first "lay reports" and the second "professional reports." The distinction between lay and professional reports contributes to an understanding of the process of reaching decisions in these committee meetings. It gives us a way to understand the "presentational" way of making decisions observed in these meetings. The authority of the professionals recommendations are grounded in the differences in the structure of these two kinds of reports. The role that language plays in grounding the authority of

accounts is explored further in the following section.

## The Mystification of Language and the Language of Mystification

There is a significant difference in the way in which professional reports (i. e., those offered by the psychologist and the nurse) on the one hand and the lay reports (i. e., those offered by the classroom teacher and the mother) on the other hand are treated by other members of the committee. The reports by the psychologist and the nurse are accepted without question or challenge, while those of the mother and the teacher are interrupted continuously by questions. No one asked the psychologist or the nurse to clarify the technical terms during their reports, while the classroom teacher and mother were often asked to provide further information or to clarify previous statements. I have already characterized the classroom teacher's report as an interrogation: the classroom teacher presented information, and either the special education teacher, the principal, the psychologist, or the nurse asked her for further information (see transcript line # 8). Neither the mother nor any of the educators present asked the psychologist for more details, further information, or to clarify technical terms.

In fact, the mother made only one request for clarification during the course of the entire meeting--and that was at its conclusion, just as the formal business was being finished. Her question was about "PE":

422 SET check over ( (( )) ) (5-6) I don't think I addressed P.E.

423 Psy I don't think we uh, oh, ok, we do not need that, okay, he does not need physical edu//

424 Mot. ((I want to ask something about that while you mentioned P.E. You mean physical education/))

425 ? mmhmmm

426 Mot. Does the school have a soccer program/ or is that just totally separate from um, you know, part of the boys' club or::-

427 Prin =Right. It's a parent organized, um, association-

428 Mot Is there something at the school that would have information on it if it comes up in the season, because Shane really has expressed an interest in that

Mot=Mother

One way to account for the differential treatment of the professionals and lay person's report, especially the differences in requests for clarification of technical terms and the grounds of conclusions is in terms of "membership." While the psychologist's and nurse's statements about educational test results and their interpretations may be obscure to non-educators (i.e., researchers), they are in fact, comprehensible to the participants themselves. What seems to be a problem for outsiders, is not a problem for members of this particular community.

However, that account does not explain the mother's request near the end of the meeting about the meaning of the expression "PE." If the technical terms used in this meeting were to be ranked in order from the most technical to the most ordinary, then "PE" would appear closer to the everyday usage end of the continuum than terms like "VADS," "Bender Gestalt," "aural oral channel of communication." Yet, the mother requested information about PE and not these other terms. The "membership" account also does not account for the points of clarification directed at the classroom teacher.

As a result of the weakness inherent in the membership account, I am inclined to consider another possibility: the authority of the professional

report resides in the very mode of its presentation. The parents and other educators do not challenge the ambiguity of the psychologist's report because the obscurity of its language and the mode of its presentation shrouds the psychologist with a "cloak of competence."[5]

The Obscurity of Language.

TenHouten and Kaplan (1973) compare "propositional inquiries" with "appositional inquiries." Science is cited as an exemplar of the first category of investigations because it is concerned with matters of truth, fact, and correctness. A propositional analysis seeks clarification by the application of the principles of formal logic to the investigation. Propositional analysis demands that the findings of an investigation be compatible with the corpus of knowledge, rules, and propositions that compose "scientific knowledge" (Garfinkel, 1967:185-206). "The incumbent is to harmonize his sense of the situation with the external body of knowledge as 'the literature'" (TenHouten and Kaplan, 1973:135). The goal of propositional analysis is the discovery and reporting of findings. The reliability of findings is checked against the community of scholars who make up 'the discipline.' "In science . . . the telling, the formalizing to others is primary" (TenHouten and Kaplan, 1973:135). The reports themselves are supposed to be clear, objective, and concise. They are written to clarify, to illuminate. The authority of scientific investigation resides, in part, in the light that it sheds into places where there was darkness previously.

---

5. See Edgerton (1967) for for an earlier and different use of this expression.

Appositional inquiries are characterized as having features which are "mirror images" of those attributed to propositional inquiries. While propositional inquiries search for clarity, appositional inquiries seek opacity. Where propositional inquiries employ formal logic, appositional inquiries employ "structured perception" to guide investigations. Where propositional inquiries require a formalized report of findings, appositional inquiries have no such formal requirement.

TenHouten and Kaplan cite inquiries that have a mystical overtone to them, such as the Tarrot, I Ching, and sorcery as examples of the appositional mode of reasoning. It appears to me that the professional educator's reports, which are activities from a very mundane everyday situation, share at least one feature in common with these appositional inquiries: to mystify by the use of obscure and technical language.

The psychologist, through her report, is claiming privileged knowledge about the child, and is making a recommendation about the next step in his educational career. The psychologist's report gains its status and authority by virtue of the fact that it is obscure and difficult to understand. The privileged status of the psychologist's expertise is displayed in the technical language of her report.

There is a certain mystique in the use of technical vocabulary, as evidenced by the special status that the technical language of doctors, lawyers, and businessmen is given in our society (Shuy, 1973, Philips, 1977; Shuy and Larkin, 1978). Technical language is mystifying (Marcuse, 1964; Laing, 1967; Habermas, 1972). The use of technical language indicates a superior status and a special knowledge based on long training and specialized qualifications.

The Authority of the Office in the Text.

Meaning is negotiated in everyday discourse. Speakers and hearers both take responsibility for the construction of understanding. According to observers from a wide variety of perspectives, a first maxim of conversation is that speakers will speak clearly; they intend to make sense and be understood (Grice, 19 ;Merleau-Ponty, 1964; Sacks, Schegloff,Jefferson, 1974).

Hearers contribute to meaning in discourse by making inferences from the conversational string of utterances. They display their understanding actively, through "back channel work" (Duncan et al, 1972), which includes eye contact, head nods, and vocalics such as uh huhs, and even lexical items like "I see," "I understand." When the hearer does not understand "a request for clarification," the manifest purpose of which is to obtain more information, is in order (Garvey, Christian). The request for clarification is generated by the hearers when they do not think that the speaker is speaking clearly.

The grounds for this kind of negotiation of meaning are removed from the committee by the institutionalized trappings of the meeting. As indicated above, the psychologist had been designated "case carrier." As case carrier, the psychologist assembled the "file" on the student. The file represents the official, school sanctioned version of the student being considered by the committee. The psychologist presented her report. In doing so, she is presenting the school's case concerning the student. The case is the culmination of institutionalized work. She is speaking for the institution in her presentation. The school psychologist's presentation of the case to the committee is augmented by officially sanctioned props. These include the case

file itself (a bulky manila folder on display in front of the psychologist), test results, carefully prepared notes, and her designation as leader of the meeting. When she presents the case, she reads from notes. By contrast, the mother and the teacher have no such props. They speak from memory, not from notes. They call upon remembered knowledge of first hand observations, not compilations of remembered information.

While the school psychologist speaks, then, it is from an institutionally designated position of authority. The authority of the psychologist's claims are grounded in her official capacity as case carrier. To interrupt, to question, to request a clarification of the psychologist, then, is a challenge to the authority of the official position of the district and its representative concerning this child.

When technical language is used, and embedded in the institutional trappings of the formal proceedings of a meeting, the grounds for negotiating meaning are removed from under the conversation. Because the speaker and hearers do not share membership in a common language community, the hearer does not have the expertise to issue a challenge. The hearer is placed in the position of assuming the speaker is speaking knowledgeably, and the hearer does not have the competence to understand. When technical language is used, even though the possibility for active negotiation of meaning seems to be removed, the guise of understanding remains. Yet the understanding is a passively achieved one, not the active one associated with everyday discourse. Instead of signalling a lack of understanding via such tacit devices as back channel work and manifest ones like requests for clarification, the committee members (including the mother) remain silent, thereby tacitly contributing to

the guise that understanding has been achieved.

Summary

In sum, the parents and the other people attending the meeting are not supposed to understand the technical language of the psychologist's report. The language used by the psychologist is not intended to clarify. It is intended to obscure. The function of the technical language of the educational setting, like the language of appositional inquiry, is not intended to illuminate, it is to mystify.

## Conclusions

We now return to the question that was raised at the outset of this paper: How is it arranged such that committees of educators meet and make decisions without seeming to do so? The differences in the manner in which the professional and lay people in the committee reported information highlights the way in which the language that people use structures role relationships. And, the structure of role relationships found embedded in the language used by the committee members, in turn, provides the grounds of the authority of the claims and recommendations made. Despite the fact that they were composed of a highly technical vocabulary, the professional reports were accepted without challange or question, while the Lay Reports were continually interrupted with requests for clarification and further information.

This differential treatment can be understood in terms of the authority that reports gain by their very mode of presentation. The ambiguity of professional reports is not challanged because the obscurity of professional language shrouds professionals in a "cloak of competence." The authority of

the professional report comes from its very incomprehensibility and its obscurity. The psychologist and the nurse gain their authority from the mastery and use of a technical language that others do not understand and do not question. The professional report gains its status and authority by virtue of the fact that it is obscure, difficult to understand, and is embedded in the institutional trappings of the formal proceedings of the committee meeting. And, it is this authority that contributes to the assembly of the presentational manner of reaching decisions observed in the committee meetings, such that decisions are "presented," not "discussed," "argued," or "negotiated."

Here we have yet another instance of the "politics of experience" (Laing, 1967; Pollner, 1975; Mehan and Wood, 1975: 215 -218). The various members of the committee experience this student differently. More specifically, the Classroom Teacher and the Mother provide accounts about the student's performance that compete with the Professional's version of the student's academic difficulties. Yet, by meeting's end, one version of the student, that provided by the Psychologist and the Nurse, prevailed.

In concert with others, people work to establish some unequivocal foundation beneath such "endless equivocalities" (Pollner, 1975: 411). Often, consensual resolutions are achieved when one or another protagonists relinguish their experience of the world as the preferred version. In this case, the resolution was not negotiated. Instead, the members of the committee resolved the disjuncture between lay and professional versions by credentialling the Professional version as the official version of this student.

These, then, are some of the ways in which the committee's mode of decision making is grounded in the reflexive relations among language and role.

## References

Abrahansson, H. Bureaucracy or Participation: The Logic of Organization. Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1977.

Cantor, N. & Mischel, W. Prototypes in person perception. In Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, 1979, 12, 3-52.

Coles, G. The learning disabilities test battery: some empirical and social issues. In Harvard Educational Review, 1978, 48(3), 313-340.

D'Andrade, R. Memory and the assessment of behavior. In Measurement in the Social Sciences. H.M. Blalock, Jr. (Ed.) Chicago: Aldine, 1974.

Duncan, O.D. Featherman, D.C. & Duncan, B. Socioeconomic Background and Achievement. New York: Seminar press, 1972.

Edgerton, R.B. The Cloak of Competence. Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1967.

Erickson, F. & Shultz, J. When is a Context? In ICHD Newsletter, 1977, 1(2), 5-10.

Erickson, F. & Shultz, J.J. Talking to the Man: Social and Cultural Organization of Communication In Counselling Interviews. New York: Academic Press, 1980.

Ervin-Tripp, S. Language Acquisition and Communicative Chance. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1973.

Garfinkel, H. Studies in Ethnomethodology. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1967.

Habermas, J. Toward a Theory of Communicative Competence. In Recent Sociology #2: Patterns of Communicative Behavior. H.P. Dreitzel (Ed.). New York: MacMillan, 1970.

Heap, J. Description in ethnomethodology. In Human Studies, 1980, 3(1), 87-106.

Hertweck, A. & Mehan, H. The Three R's: Referral, Rehabilitation, and Ramification. Paper presented at the 1981 AERA Meetings, Los Angeles, California, April 19, 1981.

Hymes, D. Foundations in Sociolinguistics. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1974.

Laing, R.D. The Politics of Experience. New York: Pantheon, 1967.

Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. Metaphors We Live By. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Lopes, L. "I'm sorry to have to put it that way." But it is the only way he can: Two Tiered Ethnography of a Couple in Therapy. Unpublished PhD dissertation, Palo Alto: Stanford University, 1979.

Marcuse, H. One Dimensional Man. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964.

McDermott, R.P., Gospodinoff, K. & Aron, J. Criteria for an ethnographically adequate description of concerted activities and their contexts. In Semiotica, 1978, 24(3/4).

Mehan, H. et al Identifying Handicapped Students. In Organizational Behavior in Schools and School Districts. S.B. Bacharach (Ed.) New York: Praeger Press, 1981.

Mehan, H., Hertweck, A., Combs, S.E., & Flynn, P.J. Teachers' Interpretations of Students' Behavior. In Communicating in the Classroom. L.C. Wilkinson (Ed.) New York: Academic Press, 1981.

Mehan, H. Structuring school structure. In Harvard Educational Review, 1978, 45(1), 311-338.

Mehan, H. Learning Lessons. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979.

Mehan, H. Practical Decision Making in Naturally Occurring Institutional Settings. In: Everyday Cognition: Its Development and Social Context. Barbara Rogof and Jean Lave (eds.). Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981.

Mehan, H. & Wood, H. The Reality of Ethnomethodology. New York: Wiley Interscience, 1975.

Meihls, J.L. Handicapping Students. Paper presented at Second Annual Ethnography in Education Forum, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, March, 1981.

Merleau-Ponty, M. Signs. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964.

Parsons, T. The Structure of Social Action. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1932.

Philips, S. The Role of Spatial Positioning and Alignment in Defining Interactional Units: The American Courtroom as a case in point. Paper presented at the American Anthropological Association Meetings, Houston, Texas, 1977.

Pollner, M. 'The Very coinage of your brain': The Anatomy of reality disjunctures. In: Philosophy of Social Science, 1975, 5, 411-430.

Schelling, T. Strategies of Conflict. New York: Oxford University Press, 1950.

Shuy, R. Problems of Communication in the Cross-Cultural Medical Interview.

Paper presented at the American Sociological Association Meetings, New York, August, 1973.

Shuy, R., and Larkin, D. L. Linguistic considerations in the simplification/clarification of insurance policy language. Discourse Processes (1):305-321.

Shweder, R.A. Likeness and likelihood in everyday thought: magical thinking in judgments about personality. In Current Anthropology, 1977, 18, 637-648.

Simon, N. Administrative Behavior. New York: The Free Press, 1949.

Tenhouten, W. & Kaplan, C. Science and Its Mirror Image. New York: The Free Press, 1973.

Watkins, J. Imperfect Rationality. In Explanation in the Behavioral Sciences. R. Borger & F. Cioffi (Eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.

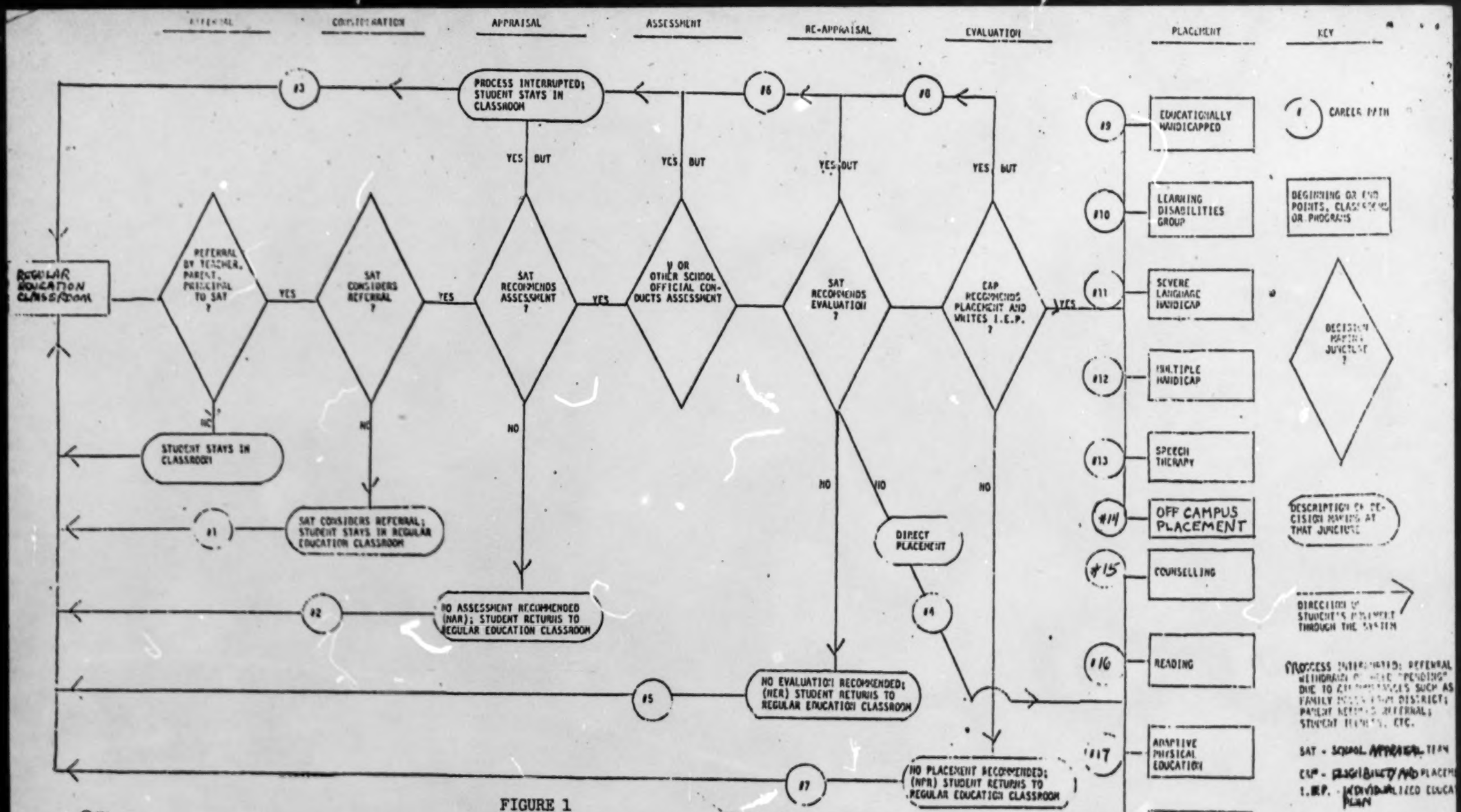


FIGURE 1

REFERRAL PROCESS IN COAST DISTRICT

TABLE 1

CAREER PATHS THROUGH THE REFERRAL SYSTEM

| Career Path # | Description | No. | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Child referred, case never considered by SAT; child remains in classroom | 1 | 0.7 |
| 2. | SAT considers case, no assessment recommended; child remains in classroom | 19 | 13.6 |
| 3. | Process interrupted at appraisal phase; child remains in classroom | 24 | 17.1 |
| 4. | SAT considers case at re-appraisal phase, makes direct placement (Adaptive P.E.=1; Bilingual =3; Reading =1; Counselling =6) | 11 | 7.9 |
| 5. | SAT considers case, recommends assessment; assessment conducted, no evaluation recommended, child remains in classroom | 28 | 20.0 |
| 6. | Process interrupted at assessment or re-appraisal phase; child remains in classroom | 4 | 2.8 |
| 7. | E & P considers case, no placement recommended; child remains in classroom | 1 | 0.7 |
| 8. | Process interrupted at evaluation phase; child remains in classroom | 1 | 0.7 |
| 9. | E & P considers case; recommends placement in Educationally Handicapped Classroom. | 7 | 5.0 |
| 10. | E & P considers case; recommends placement in Learning Disabilities Group | 36 | 25.7 |
| 11. | E & P considers case; recommends placement in Severe Language Handicapped Classroom | 3 | 2.1 |
| 12. | E & P considers case; recommends placement in Multiple Handicapped Classroom | 2 | 1.4 |
| 13. | E & P considers case; recommends placement in Speech Therapy | 3 | 2.1 |
| | TOTAL | 140 | 99.8% |

| TOPICS OF DISCUSSION | TRANSCRIPT LINE | SOURCE OF INFORMATION (SPEAKER) | MODE OF PRESENTATION |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. results of ed. testing | a) 3.2-5.30 | School Psychol. | reading report; informative speech act |
| | b) 91 | Nurse | reading report; informative speech act |
| 2. academic performance in class | 8-34 | Classroom Teacher | elicitation; responsive speech acts |
| 3. Student's reaction to failure | 40-45 | Classroom Teacher | elicitation; responsive speech acts |
| 4. Student's feelings in class | 58-61<br>82-89 | Classroom Teacher | elicitation; responsive speech acts |
| 5. Student's reaction to Special Ed. | a) 73-74 | Classroom T. | elicitation; responsive |
| | b) 71-72 | Mother | elicitation; responsive |
| 6. Fine motor problems at home | 46-57 | Mother | elicitation; responsive |
| 7. Student's sensitivity at home | 62 | Mother | informative speech act |
| 8. Student's attitudes toward school | 63-68 | Mother | elicitation; responsive speech act |
| 9. Student's feelings | 71-81 | Mother | elicitation; responsive speech act |
| 10. Reason for problem | a) 8-12 | Teacher | elicitation; responsive speech act |
| | b) 37 | Learning Disability T. | informative speech acts |

Table 2

TOPIC-SPEAKER RELATIONSHIPS IN INFORMATION PRESENTATION

PORTION OF E & P MEETING